

A World to Win



The Politics of the Socialist Workers Party

No 2

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This is the second in a short series of pamphlets outlining aspects of the politics of the Socialist Workers Party. Those joining the Socialist Workers Party naturally want to know about our full range of politics. Many publications and books are available through the SWP and its sister organisations around the world and on the web. As well as this our branches feature regular political discussions and occasional educationals.

But people are busy and may not have time to rapidly digest many books and periodicals but want to familiarise themselves with our core politics nonetheless. With this in mind, we have produced a short series of small pamphlets reproducing articles which cover the main outlines of our politics.

These pamphlets will be useful, we hope, to those who have recently joined the party, those thinking of joining and even seasoned members.

Following on from the first pamphlet in this series, we here reproduce what we hope are accessible articles from with our political tradition on a variety of topics. These articles are reproduced from books, pamphlets and periodicals produced by the SWP Ireland and its sister parties around the world.

You are encouraged to discuss what you read, and ask any questions you may have, with a more experienced member or perhaps ask for a branch discussion on one of the topics.

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A mass movement's strategy towards the state is vital to its success.

By Alex Callinicos —Speech given on 25 August 2004

A mass movement's strategy towards the state is vital to its success.

The huge wave of anti-war protests on 15 February were an astonishing demonstration of just how formidable a movement of resistance to imperialism is now developing around the world. But we should have no illusions about the power of our enemies. Politically, Tony Blair has never been weaker. But he still presides over a state that has formidable coercive power.

The Metropolitan Police may have been on their best behaviour on 15 February, but the tanks at Heathrow were a piece of political theatre designed both to frighten and to intimidate. Elsewhere the message has been less subtle. Anti-war activists in Egypt have been arrested and tortured. In New York on 15 February the police penned the demonstrators in and beat them up when they protested. These were just small glimpses of the concentrated violence that every state can deploy against those who challenge it.

Reformism: the state as ally

So how do we handle the state? Within the anti-capitalist movement two approaches are popular. The first sees the state as potentially an ally that can impose controls on capital and humanise the system. Such an approach is implicit in the emphasis on the Tobin Tax on international financial transactions that is the starting point for Attac in France and its affiliates elsewhere in Europe.

For this broadly speaking reformist wing of the movement, the coming to office of left governments in Latin America—and above all the election to the Brazilian presidency of Lula, leader of the Workers Party (PT)—is a turning point. 'Viva Brasil!' ran the headline in the January issue of 'Le Monde diplomatique', the left wing Parisian monthly that launched Attac. Though he has been more cautious in writing, Walden Bello of Focus on the Global South, speaking at a meeting in London last November, expressed qualified support for Lula's commitment to an economic programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that requires his government to achieve a budget surplus of 3.75 percent of national income during his first year in office.

For anyone on the left in Britain in particular, this commitment has strong echoes of Gordon Brown's acceptance of strict spending targets inherited from the Tories during New Labour's first two years in office—a decision that goes a long way towards explaining the disastrous state of public services in Britain today. There are other parallels between Lula and [British] New Labour. For example, his government intends to grant the central bank autonomy—a standard neoliberal measure that was, of course, Brown's first action on taking office in May

1997.

Lula has justified these measures by saying that his government is a 'transitional' one—he wants to move away from neoliberalism but initially has to make compromises. But it's much more likely that the commitments that he has undertaken will lock his government into the same sort of neoliberal prison that has prevented the African National Congress in South Africa from fulfilling its promises of economic reconstruction for the benefit of the majority since the end of apartheid in 1994.

Underlying this pattern is, of course, the economic power of international capitalism. In the months before the presidential elections last autumn, the steady downward fall of the Brazilian real on the international currency markets squeezed concession after concession from Lula. Whereas in the past—say, under Harold Wilson in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, or François Mitterrand in France during the early 1980s—social democratic governments caved in under the effect of capital flight and currency crises, today the mere fear of such pressures is enough to get the contemporary centre left to surrender to the Washington Consensus even before they take office.

Should, quite exceptionally, reformists stand firm in the face of these attacks there are other ways of stopping them. The rebellion of the rich against Hugo Chavez's radical nationalist regime in Venezuela is an indication of the sort of forces that can be deployed against a left wing government that sticks to its guns. In September we will commemorate the 30th anniversary of the military coup that destroyed Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile.

Recent historical experience thus confirms the judgement made long ago by Marx and Lenin that the state can't simply be used as an instrument of social transformation. It is part of the capitalist system, not a means for changing it. The economic pressures of international capital—reflected particularly in the movements of money across the globe—push states to promote capital accumulation. Moreover, in the core of the state itself is a permanent bureaucratic apparatus centred on control of the means of coercion—the armed forces, police, and intelligence services—whose ultimate allegiance is not to elected governments but to the unelected ruling class.

This doesn't mean that movements should be indifferent to which government holds office. Lula's government, for example, is an uneasy compromise between the pressures of global capitalism and the social movements that form the mass base of the PT, particularly organised workers and landless labourers. War with Iraq poses a more serious political crisis for Tony Blair than for his right wing allies Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Jose Maria Aznar in Spain because even under his leadership the Labour Party is still bound up with the left, particularly through its link with the trade unions. Mass movements should put pressure and make demands particularly on the governments that they helped to make, but they should retain their independence of them.

Autonomism: evading power

Counterposed to reformism within the anti-capitalist movement is a position that is apparently its opposite, renouncing not only a reliance on the existing state, but the very objective of taking power from capital. This is the position taken by the autonomist wing of the movement whose most famous representatives are the Italian disobedienti. This takes

its inspiration from some of the remarks of the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos. For instance, he writes, 'Perhaps, for example, the new political morality will be constructed in a new space that will not require the taking or retention of power but the counterweight and opposition that requires and obliges the power to "rule by obeying".'

One might regard this strategy as a pragmatic adaptation to the plight of the Zapatistas, whose 1994 rising in Chiapas (south-eastern Mexico) was rapidly surrounded by the federal military. Its survival has therefore come to depend on using the pressure of national and international opinion to constrain the Mexican state from mounting an all-out attack on the guerrillas of Chiapas. But more favourably placed autonomist intellectuals elsewhere in the world have championed a similar politics of renunciation.

For example, Toni Negri, co-author of 'Empire', in a widely circulated interview after 11 September 2001, argued for a strategy of 'exodus and desertion'. Negri has long advocated such an approach. He wrote in an Italian prison in the early 1980s, summarising his own previous development, 'Power was now seen as a foreign enemy force in society, to be defended against, but which it was no use "conquering" or "taking over"'. Rather, it was a question of its reduction, of keeping it at a distance.'

The most fully developed version of this theory has been put forward by John Holloway, a British autonomist Marxist based in Mexico, in a book whose name sums up its content: 'Change the World Without Taking Power'. Holloway espouses an extreme form of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, in which all the apparently objective structures of capitalist society are simply alienated expressions of human activity, based on the separation of subject and object, or as Holloway puts it, doer and done.

From this starting point Holloway draws two main conclusions. Firstly, any attempt to understand capitalism as a set of objective structures implies the abandonment of Marx's original conception of socialism as self emancipation. Accordingly, virtually the entire subsequent Marxist tradition is dismissed as 'scientistic' and authoritarian.

Secondly, dissolving the fetishistic structures of alienated human activity is 'a movement of negation', the assertion of what Holloway calls 'anti-power'. He tends to present this as the liberation of qualities that are denied by capitalism: 'That which is oppressed and resists is not only a who but a what. It is not only particular groups of people that are oppressed (women, indigenous, peasants, factory workers, and so on), but also (and perhaps especially) particular aspects of the personality of all of us: our self confidence, our sexuality, our playfulness, our creativity.'

But what does this mean more concretely? The answer is very confused. On the one hand, Holloway says that labour seeks to flee capital: 'flight is in the first place negative, the refusal of domination, the destruction and sabotage of the instruments of domination (machinery, for instance), a running away from domination, nomadism, exodus, desertion.' This takes us back to Negri's slogans advocating running alternative forms of cooperative production within the framework of capitalist economic relations. In Argentina, for example, his and Holloway's ideas have been used to justify the idea that the small network of factories abandoned by their bosses and taken over by the workers represents the beginning of a new post-capitalist economy.

On the other hand, Holloway remembers enough Marx to know that this strategy is fatally

flawed, since it leaves most productive resources still controlled by capital, which can thus dictate the basis on which cooperatives can get access to credit and markets. 'As long as the means of doing [ie the means of production] are in the hands of capital then doing will be ruptured and turned against itself. The expropriator must indeed be expropriated.'

But when it comes to spelling out how this should be achieved Holloway disappears into speculative reveries about 'the dissolution of the thing-ness of the done, its (re)integration into the social flow of doing'. This fog of metaphysics can only be dispersed if one recognises that, even if they depend on human labour for their existence and reproduction, the structures of capitalism have an objective reality that has to be analysed and understood if we do want to change the world.

This is not because analysis is an end in itself. On the contrary, the point of taking seriously capitalism's objective structures is to identify the torsions and points of weakness they involve. Holloway at several points makes the good point against Negri that capital is vulnerable because it depends on the labour that creates it. But properly pursuing this insight requires a theoretical and practical engagement with concrete forms of working class struggle and organisation. Instead Holloway declares that 'we do not struggle as working class, we struggle against being working class, against being classified', as if one can abolish capitalist relations of production by pretending they aren't there.

Revolution as the triumph of democracy

Common to reformism and autonomism is despair. Both currents share the belief that the power of capital and its state cannot be defeated. So either we seek to treat the capitalist state as a benevolent agent of social transformation or we try to evade and constrain it. Revolutionary socialists do not think capital and the state are too strong to overthrow. There is an alternative source of power in capitalist society. This is to be found in the extraordinary capacities of democratic self organisation possessed by the mass of ordinary people.

The most important case of these powers is provided by workers, who are compelled to organise themselves collectively to defend their most basic interests. Workers' self organisation is particularly significant because it mobilises the power to paralyse capitalist production and therefore to cut off the supply of profits that fuels the system. The significance of trade unionism is that it provides a framework within which workers organise to resist exploitation on a daily basis at work.

Self organisation is not, of course, workers' exclusive possession. The contemporary movements against global capitalism and war, which still only very partially overlap with the organised working class, have shown astonishing capacities of coordinated action across national borders—at summit protests, the Social Forums, and, above all, on 15 February.

A marked feature of the new cycle of struggle since Seattle has been a number of other movements not based on the workplace—for example, in Latin America, small peasants and landless labourers, as well as the Argentinian piqueteros. These movements, however, have all sorts of connections with the organised working class (the piqueteros, for example, are led by unemployed trade unionists). But none, by themselves, have the economic power that workers have by virtue of the fact that capitalism runs on their labour.

At high points of struggle in the past workers broke out of the limits imposed by conventional

trade unionism. They mounted mass strikes for political as well as economic demands. To prosecute these struggles they developed new forms of organisation that united the entire class at a local and national level on the basis of councils of workers' delegates. These forms emerged anew in the great popular upheavals of the 20th century—in the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79, and the rise of Solidarity in Poland in 1980-81.

These workers' councils embody a more advanced form of democracy than is practised in liberal capitalist societies. They are based upon rank and file participation, decentralised decision making where people work and live, and the immediate accountability of delegates to higher bodies to those who elected them. The councils represent an alternative way of running society to the centralised and bureaucratic forms of power on which capitalist domination depends.

It is through this workers' democracy that the oppressed and exploited majority can mobilise the power needed to take on the capitalist state. Indeed, one pressure behind the formation of workers' councils is the need to take over the functions of local government from state agencies when 'normal service' breaks down during mass strikes. But there is no reason for workers' councils to stop at supplanting the local representatives of the state. Once they embrace an entire national society, they have the organisational capacity and the economic power to replace the state as a whole.

To achieve this objective depends on the developing workers' state concentrating its forces on overcoming—by force if necessary—the resistance of the core apparatuses of capitalist state power. This is fundamentally a political and not an organisational problem. It requires a political struggle within the new forms of workers' power to win the majority to the recognition that, unless the capitalist state is dismantled, sooner or later it will use its coercive power to crush the mass movement. This is the supreme function of a mass revolutionary party—not to seize power for itself, but to win the argument that the new democracy should storm the last strongholds of capitalist power.

In the classical Marxist tradition, then, revolution isn't about a minority coup. It's about extending the forms of workers' democracy that develop during mass strikes from being simply a means of prosecuting the struggle or a 'counter-power' to the main institutions of capitalist domination—to becoming the organs through which the masses actually govern society for themselves. Revolution has to be about seizing power, because otherwise the capitalist state will survive to become the launching pad for counter-revolution. But overturning the existing state is the culmination of a process of self emancipation in which the mass of ordinary people take over the running of society and begin to build a new world.

Marxism on oppression

The heart of Marxism is that the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself, writes Tony Cliff. At the same time Marx argues that the prevailing ideas in society are the ideas of the ruling class. One important form these ideas take is the break-up of the unity of workers into different races, nationalities and gender.

Oppression of blacks by whites, of women by men, etc, divides the working class, and the policy of divide and rule strengthens the power of the capitalists.

How does the oppression affect the condition of workers who belong to the oppressed section? Black workers in Britain are exploited as workers. Being discriminated against as blacks sharpens the exploitation. They get lower wages, their conditions at work are worse, they suffer from bad housing and other social deprivations. The same applies to women workers, who are forced to suffer a double burden of earning wages plus looking after the children and the house. Their jobs are very much more marginal; they have less opportunity for attaining skills; they are forced to give up work to look after the young children; their oppression sharpens their exploitation.

How does the oppression affect workers who belong to the oppressing section? Of course they believe they are superior to the "inferior" workers. But do they really benefit from this? White workers in the Southern states of the US think they benefit because they earn more than the blacks, have better housing, and so on. But white workers earn far more in the North; in fact blacks in the North earn more than Southern whites.

Some Protestant workers in Northern Ireland may think that beating the Catholics is good for them, otherwise they would not do it. So the Protestant worker is more likely to have a job and be better off than the Catholic worker, but the same worker earns less than a worker in Birmingham or Glasgow.

The same applies to the relations between a male and female worker. He earns more than her, therefore on the face of it he benefits from her oppression. But this is a very shallow view of the situation. Think about it. A male worker writes to his friend, "Have you heard the marvellous news? My wife gets peanuts in wages, the nursery costs the earth, her job is under threat all the time, and to put the cap on it, she is pregnant again and there are no means to get an abortion. Marvellous news!"

If I'm travelling on a filthy dirty train, as a white man under capitalism I will have a seat next to the window. The woman or the black will have a seat away from the window in even worse conditions than me. But the real problem is the train. We all have to endure the same train, We have no control over a driver who is taking us all into the abyss.

The most oppressed section of the working class always reflects the extreme horrors of capitalism. Trotsky once wrote that if one wants to grasp the need for change to a new society, one needs to look through the eyes of women. If one wants to grasp the nature of decaying, senile capitalism, one needs to look since the last world war, through the eyes of Jews. If one wants to grasp the nature of, for example, British society today, one needs to look through the eyes of Neville and Doreen Lawrence, the parents of Stephen Lawrence, the

black youth murdered by five Nazis, the latter protected by the British police.

To achieve unity between white and black workers the white workers must move toward the black workers and go a mile further. To achieve unity between male and female workers, the male worker must go out of his way to prove that he is not part of the oppressors. Lenin put it very simply in 1902. He wrote that when workers go on strike for higher wages they are simply trade unionists. Only when they go on strike against the beating of Jews or of students are they really socialists.

A strike involving black and white workers helps to undermine racism. A strike strengthens solidarity, and therefore has an impact beyond the immediate issue. The spiritual changes in workers is the most precious result of the strike.

But solidarity can start from an anti-racist demonstration that leads to a feeling of unity with black workers that has an impact on future industrial disputes. The meetings in London in solidarity with the Lawrences are very large, composed of black and white people, and no doubt will have a big impact not only on the attitude of millions to the police but also will inspire increasing solidarity among workers on a whole number of other issues.

A strike in which men and women stand shoulder to shoulder helps to overcome sexism. One should remember the Paris Commune where the women fought brilliantly, causing one British reporter to say that if all the Communards were women they would have won.

In a meeting in London a short while ago I said, "Come the revolution, and the chairperson of the workers' council in London will be a young black woman aged 26, and a lesbian." I chose these characteristics because all of them break the taboos of capitalism. Young is bad. Black is bad. Woman is bad. Lesbian is bad. After the meeting a young black woman approached me and said, "That's me. I am black, I'm a woman, as you can see, I am aged 26 and I'm a lesbian." I said to her, "I'm sorry, sister, you have missed the boat. The revolution will be in ten years time. You'll be too old." Of course my words should not be taken literally. The chairperson of the London workers' council can be an Irishman aged 70, a grandfather of 15 kids.

A revolutionary has to be extreme in opposition to all forms of oppression. A white revolutionary must be more extreme in opposing racism than a black revolutionary. A gentile revolutionary must oppose anti-Semitism more strongly than any Jew. A male revolutionary must be completely intolerant of any harassment or belittling of women. We must be the tribune of the oppressed.

Why do we need a revolutionary party?

Reprinted from Tony Cliff's Marxism at the Millennium, Chapter 2. Cliff was operating in Britain and many of his examples are taken from British experience.

Uneven consciousness in the working class

Why do we need a revolutionary party? The basic reason is in two statements Marx made. He stated that "the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class" and at the same time he said that "the prevailing ideas of every society are the ideas of the ruling class."

There is a contradiction between these two statements. But the contradiction is not in Marx's head. It exists in reality. If only one of the statements was correct, there would not be a need for a revolutionary party. If the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class, and that is all, then, to be honest, we need do nothing about fighting for socialism—let's sit with folded arms and smile. The workers will emancipate themselves!

If, on the other hand, "the prevailing ideas of every society are the ideas of the ruling class", and that is all, workers will always accept the ideas of the rulers. Then we can sit with folded arms and cry because nothing can be done.

The reality is that the two statements are correct. The class struggle always expresses itself, not just in a conflict between workers and capitalists, but inside the working class itself. On the picket line it is not true that workers are there to try and prevent the capitalist from working. The capitalists never worked in their lives so they will not work during a strike. What the picket line is about is one group of workers trying to prevent another group of workers from crossing the picket line in the interests of the employers.

The question of workers' power, what Marx called the dictatorship of the proletariat. Why would you need a dictatorship of the proletariat if the whole working class is united and there are only a tiny minority of capitalists in opposition? You could say go home, and we'd finish with the bosses. If the whole working class is united we could spit at them and flood them into the Atlantic!

The reality is that there will be workers on one side and backward workers on the other side. Because "the prevailing ideas of every society are the ideas of the ruling class", the workers are split between different levels of consciousness.

Not only this. The same worker can have split consciousness in his head. He or she can be a good wages militant, can hate the boss, but when it comes to black people it's a different story.

I remember we lived with a chap, a printer, in the same house, a very skilled man. He was going on holiday and I asked, "Are you flying tomorrow?" He said, "No, I can't fly tomorrow. It's Friday the 13th. We'll have to wait till Saturday." This man in the 20th century has some ideas from 1,000 years ago.

Against opportunism and against sectarianism

You can stand on a picket line and next to you is a worker who makes racist comments. You can do one of three things. You can say, "I'm not standing with him on a picket line. I'm going home because there no one makes racist comments." That is sectarianism because if "the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class" I have to stand with him on a picket line.

The other possibility is simply avoiding the question. Someone makes a racist comment and you pretend you haven't heard and you say, "The weather is quite nice today!" That's opportunism.

The third position is that you argue with this person against racism, against the prevailing ideas of the ruling class. You argue and argue. If you convince him, excellent. But if you don't, still when the scab lorry comes you link arms to stop the scabs because "the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class."

The revolutionary party: university of the working class

The bourgeoisie didn't have a revolutionary party 20 years before their revolution. The Jacobins in France didn't exist before 1789.

Why do we have to start 20, 30 or 50 years before the revolution? We have to start to talk about the need for a revolutionary party to lead the working class in struggle, in revolution.

The Jacobins were established during the act of the revolution itself. Why? Because when you look to the relations between the capitalists and the nobility, it is different from the relationship between the capitalists and the working class.

It is true that the capitalists had to overthrow the nobility and the working class has to overthrow the capitalists, but there is a big difference. It is not true the nobility owned all the wealth and the capitalists were paupers. The capitalists were rich even before the revolution. They could turn around to the nobility and say, "All right, you own the land; we own money, we own the banks. When you go bankrupt how do you save yourself? You mix your blue blood with my gold, you try to marry my daughter." When it came to ideas they could say, "All right, you have priests, we have professors. You have the Bible—we have the Encyclopaedia. Come on, move over."

The capitalists were independent intellectually from the ideas of the nobility. They influenced the nobility much more than the other way around.

The French Revolution started with a meeting of les Etats généraux (the Three Estates)—the nobility, the priesthood and the middle classes. When it came to the vote it was the nobility and the priesthood who voted with the capitalists, not the other way around.

Is our position similar? Of course not. We cannot turn to the capitalists and say, "All right, you own Ford, General Motors, ICI, we own a pair of shoes." In terms of ideas I don't know how many capitalists are influenced by Socialist Worker. Millions of workers are influenced by the Sun!

The revolutionary party of the bourgeoisie could appear during the very act of the revolution. They didn't have to prepare; they were confident. What happened on 14 July 1789?

Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins, suggested they build a statue to Louis XVI on the site of

the Bastille. He didn't know that three years on he'd cut off the head of Louis XVI. Where does the name Jacobins come from? It came from the monastery where they met. If they had known that four years later they were going to expropriate the church lands they wouldn't have named themselves after a monastery.

They were independent, they were strong and they could deal with the issues. We have a completely different situation. We belong to an oppressed class that lacks the experience of running society, because capitalists don't only own the material means of production but the mental means of production. Because of that we need a party—the party is the university of the working class. What Sandhurst is to the British Army, the revolutionary party is to the working class.

Marx says in the Communist Manifesto that communists generalise from the historical and international experience of the working class. In other words, you don't learn from just what you experience. My own experience is tiny. Any one of us has fantastically little experience. You need to generalise and to do that you need an organisation that does it. I can't myself know about the Paris Commune. I wasn't there. I was very young in 1871! So you have to have someone who gives you the information.

Trotsky therefore wrote that the revolutionary party is the memory of the working class.

Three types of workers' parties

There are three types of workers' parties: revolutionary, reformist and centrist.

The Communist Manifesto described the nature of the revolutionary party in these words:

The communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only: (1) In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. (2) In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The communists, therefore, are, on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

The second type of workers' parties are the reformist parties. In a speech to the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920 Lenin defined the Labour Party as a "capitalist workers' party".

He called it capitalist because the politics of the Labour Party do not break with capitalism. Why did he call it a workers' party? It is not because the workers voted for it. At that time more workers voted for the Conservative Party; and the Conservative Party is of course a capitalist party. Lenin called the [British] Labour Party a workers' party because it expressed the urge of workers to defend themselves against capitalism. When one watches the Labour Party conference on television, it is clear that the members of the Labour Party express different urges than the Tory party. At the Tory party conference the applause comes when speakers attack trade unionists and blacks, and praise the army, police, etc. In the Labour Party conference the applause comes when a speaker declares the need for a better health

service, better education, housing, etc.

Between the revolutionary parties and reformist parties there is a third kind of party, the centrist parties. Their main characteristic is fudge. They are neither one nor the other. The vacillate between the two. A horse produces horses, a donkey donkeys. When a horse and a donkey mate they produce a mule. A mule does not produce anything; it is sterile. With a revolutionary party there is historical continuity. It can go up or down, but it continues. With a reformist party there is historical continuity. But not with the centrists. In 1936 the POUM party in Spain had 40,000 members. Now the POUM is dead as a dodo. The Independent Labour Party in Britain had four MPs from the 1945 general election. Now there is not even a remnant of the ILP. A similar story attaches to the SAP in Germany, which was a mixture of people who came from the right, Bandlerite, wing of the KPD (German Communist Party), pacifist elements of the SPD and others from a mixed bag. It was quite a large party in the early 1930s. Now there is no sign of it.

A revolutionary teaches and learns from the working class

The revolutionary party has to lead the working class based on all the experience of the past. OK, so the party teaches the workers, but then arises the simple question: "Who teaches the teacher?" It is extremely important to understand that we can be taught by the working class. All the great ideas come from the workers themselves.

If you read Marx's Communist Manifesto he speaks about the need for a workers' government, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Then in 1871 he writes that the workers cannot take hold of the old state machine: they have to smash it—the old standing army, the bureaucracy, the police. We have to smash all this hierarchical structure and establish a new kind of state—a state without a standing army or a bureaucracy, where every official is elected, where every official gets the same rate of pay as the average worker. Did he find this out because he worked so hard in the British Museum? No, no. What happened was that the workers of Paris had taken power and that's exactly what they did.

Marx learnt from them. The Stalinists always claim that Lenin invented the idea of the soviet. Of course in the Stalinist literature Lenin invented everything! They had a concept of religious hierarchy. We have the correspondence of Lenin, and when workers established the first soviet in Petrograd in 1905, Lenin wrote four days later—what the hell is that for?

In the struggle the workers needed a new form of organisation. They learnt the hard way that if they had a strike committee in one factory it was not effective in a time of revolution. You need a strike committee which covers all the factories. And that's what the soviet was: delegates from all the factories meeting together to run the show. They did it. Lenin followed them. The party has always to learn from the class, always.

Is the party always in advance of the class? The answer is that by and large the revolutionary party is in advance of the class. Otherwise it is not a revolutionary party. So when it came to 1914 and the outbreak of the First World War, the Bolsheviks were far in advance of the class. The Bolsheviks were against the war while the majority of the workers supported it.

Then comes 1917. In 1917 you find Lenin says again and again in August and September that the party is lagging behind the class, the class is more advanced than the party and we have to run quickly to catch up with the class. The reason is a simple one. For such a long

time the workers had lacked confidence so they were behind the revolutionary party. Comes a change in the situation and they change very, very speedily.

The problem with revolutionaries is that we need a routine to survive. But the routine enters into you. You take it for granted that you are in advance of the working class. But when the workers start moving you find you are so bloody backward! The revolutionary party has to catch up with the working class. The party is not just a group of people. They are the revolutionaries and from now on they are always leading. That's rubbish. You have to fight and fight to lead all the time. You have to learn all the time, to advance all the time.

This is not just in time of revolution. You will find in the workplace that someone can be in the SWP for 20 years, a good comrade, and there's someone completely new, who joined a few months ago, and when it comes to activity the new comrade is far more advanced than the comrade who joined 20 years ago. You find this again and again.

You don't win the leadership like you have money in the bank. If you have money in the bank it gains interest. A revolutionary leadership is nothing like this. You have to win the leadership every day, every month. So for revolutionaries what counts is what they did last week, what they're doing this week and what they're doing next week. You can learn from all the experience of 100 years but the important thing is what you're doing this week. You have to fight for leadership.

Members of the reformist parties are passive and accommodating

Because the reformist party wants to get the maximum vote, it looks to the lowest common denominator. It adapts itself to the prevailing ideas.

Do you really believe that none of the Labour MPs know about the oppression of gays and lesbians? But still during the [British] elections of 1987 Patricia Hewitt, Neil Kinnock's secretary, leaked to the Sun (of all papers) an attack on the "loony left" in the councils which support gays and lesbians. Why did she do it? Because she thought that was the way to become popular. I have a leaflet from a man called John Strachey. He called himself a Marxist. In the 1929 election he stood for parliament and he had a problem—he looked Jewish. So he issued a leaflet with the heading John Strachey is British and challenged anyone who said he was Jewish to go to court. Why did he say it? I have to say I'm a Jew, but if any member of the SWP is called a Jew they'd say, "Of course I'm a Jew. I'm proud of it." You don't deny it.

But if you want the maximum numbers you have to adapt to the prevailing ideas. The reformist parties are therefore large parties but extremely passive. For example, there is a book called Labour's Grassroots where the age composition is given. In 1984 there were 573 branches of the Labour Party Young Socialists, in 1990 only 15. There were three times more members aged 66 and above than aged 25 and below. Labour Party members were asked how much time they devoted to Labour activities in the month: 50 percent said none, 30 percent said up to five hours a month, an hour a week, and only 10 percent said between five and ten hours.

Extreme passivity—that is the nature of the Labour Party. The other side of the same coin is bureaucratic control. The bureaucrats dominate the party.

Then there is the sect. Its members say quite simply, "We want to march only with people

who agree with us. We care only about people who agree with us."

The revolutionaries are those who are separate from the majority of the working class but at the same time are part of the working class. The question for revolutionaries is how to relate to non-revolutionary workers. How you relate to people who agree with you 60 percent and how, through the struggle, you can move that to 80 percent. If you are a sectarian you say, "You don't agree with me on 40 percent, I don't care about you." If you are a revolutionary you say, "We agree on 60 per cent, let's start with that and I'll argue with you about the 40 percent that we don't agree and in the struggle try to convince you."

Democratic centralism

What about the structure of the revolutionary party? Why do we speak about democratic centralism?

Let us first understand why we need democracy. If you want to go from London to Birmingham you need a bus and a driver. You don't need democratic discussion because we've done it before so we need one good driver and one good bus. The problem is that the transition from capitalism to socialism is something we've never experienced before. We don't know.

If you don't know, there's only one way to learn—by being rooted in the class and learning from the class. It is not simply that on every thing democracy solves the problem. If you want to know if there's a decline in the rate of profit, if Marx is right, don't put it to the vote! It doesn't mean anything. Either he's right or he's wrong. Think about it, read about it and decide.

There are things you must put to the vote. Everything that is connected to our struggle must be put to the test. Because we simply don't know. Because if "the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class" the working class through their own experiences will teach us.

There is a beautiful description Lenin gives of when he was in hiding after the July Days in 1917 when the Bolshevik Party became illegal and its press was smashed. The Bolsheviks were accused of being German agents. Lenin did not know how far the power of reaction had been consolidated. He describes eating with a worker he was hiding with and the worker gave him bread and said, "The bread is good. They, the capitalist class, are frightened of us." Lenin says:

The moment I heard him I understood about the class relation of forces. I understood what workers really think—that the capitalists are still frightened of us, although we are illegal, although we are beaten. Still it is not a victory of counter-revolution.

If you want to know if the workers are confident how do you know? You can't have a ballot in the press, they don't give you the opportunity. You can't meet every individual.

You cannot make a working class revolution without a deep democracy. And what the revolution is about is raising the working class to become the ruling class, about creating the most democratic system in history. Unlike under capitalism where every five years you elect someone to misrepresent you, here it is a completely different story. Under capitalism you elect the MPs but not the employers. Under capitalism we don't vote on whether to close a factory. We don't elect the army officers or the judges. In a workers' government everything

is under workers' control. Everything is in workers' power. It is the most extreme form of democracy.

So if all this is true, why do we need centralism?

First, the experience is uneven, workers have different experiences, you have to collect that experience together. Even in the revolutionary party the members are influenced by different pressures. They are influenced by the general picture and by the section of the workers to which they belong.

To overcome this sectionalism, this narrow experience, you need to centralise all the experience and division. Again you need the centralism because the ruling class is highly centralised. If you are not symmetrical to your enemy you can never win.

I was never a pacifist. If someone uses a stick on me I have to have a bigger stick! I don't believe a quotation from Marx's Capital will stop a mad dog attacking me. We have to be symmetrical to our enemies. That is why I cannot understand the anarchists when they come and say they don't need a state. The capitalists have a state. How do you smash a state without an opposition state?

Anarchists always deny the state. When they had enough strength they joined the government. That's what they did in Spain during the civil war when they joined the government. Why? Because there is no good denying something unless you smash it and if you smash it you have to replace it. What do you have to replace it with? Armed bodies of workers. And that's what the workers' state is.

The need for a mass revolutionary party

When we speak of the party leading the class it is not just a question of experience, knowledge and roots. The leadership must use the language of workers, have the spirit of workers. You have to relate to them because that's what leadership is about, You talk and listen, you don't only talk. You talk in language they understand.

But that's not enough. We need a big party. To lead the working class you need a mass party. The SWP is the smallest mass party in the world. It is a tiny party. The Bolshevik Party in 1914 had 4,000 members. After the February 1917 revolution they had 23,000 members. In August 1917 they had a quarter of a million. With a quarter of a million you can lead an industrial working class of three million.

The German Communist Party in 1918 had 4,000 members. Even if they were all geniuses they could not have won the revolution. You need a sizeable party because in order to lead you need to have a base in every factory.

I mentioned the July Days. When Lenin was accused of being a German spy 10,000 workers out of 30,000 at the Putilov factory struck for the day saying they trusted Lenin. Why? Because they had 500 Bolsheviks in Putilov factory.

If you want to lead millions you need hundreds of thousands in the party. Even the ANL [Anti Nazi League] Carnival, 150,000-strong, a marvellous achievement, in terms of the revolution was still a small thing. Even for this, we needed six, seven or eight thousand SWP members to organise it.

I detest it when people think Marxism is some sort of intellectual exercise: we interpret

things, we understand, we are more clever. Marxism is about action and for action you need size. For action you need power. We need a mass party—of half a million.

When dreams came true

By Megan Trudell from Socialist Review, No.212, October 1997.

"Whole country is wild with joy, waving red flags and singing Marseillaise. It has surpassed my wildest dreams and I can hardly believe it is true. After two and a half years of mental suffering and darkness I at last begin to see light. Long live Great Russia who has shown the world the road to freedom. May Germany and England follow in her steps." So Morgan Phillips Price, who was in Russia writing for the Manchester Guardian, described the mood in February 1917 when the Russian people threw off centuries of tyrannical rule under the tsars.

However, despite such powerful accounts of the huge steps forward in human liberation taken in 1917, in recent years there has been a steady flow of books which attempt to paint the revolution as a fundamentally undemocratic event which ruined millions of lives—partly in order to deny that 1917 has any relevance to changing the world today.

The dominant view of the revolution in these books is that it was not the act of the majority in society, but that of a handful of self appointed revolutionaries who took advantage of the situation to instal themselves in power. So Richard Pipes, author of *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, argues that "Lenin, Trotsky, and their associates seized power by force ... The government they founded ... derives from a violent act carried out by a tiny minority." And Orlando Figes, whose recent book *A People's Tragedy* has been widely praised, concurs, "The October insurrection was a coup d'état."

The logical conclusion of these arguments is that the seeds of Stalinism, one party rule and despotic terror were present in the way the Bolsheviks took power.

Not only are these claims intended as ideological attacks on the very idea of social revolution, but they are based on the worst historical inaccuracies, misquotes and unaccredited assertions. These range from statements about Lenin's "lust for power" and his "destructive instincts"—backed up by quotes from enemies of the Bolsheviks, if at all—to the ludicrous assertions in Figes that Lenin went weight training as "part of the macho culture (the black leather jackets, the militant rhetoric, the belief in action and the cult of violence) that was the essence of Bolshevism". In the light of such assaults, the need to reclaim the Russian Revolution for the socialist tradition is more important than ever.

Russia in 1917 was predominantly a peasant country. Less than a fifth of the 160 million population lived in towns. The working class, though small—3 million—was concentrated in huge industrial centres. Politically, Russia was an absolutist monarchy headed by tsar Nicholas—an empire that held many different oppressed nationalities within its borders. It was a repressive society: workers did not have the right to strike, form independent trade unions, or to negotiate collectively with employers.

The period immediately before the First World War was marked by huge strikes, but war

broke that militancy—temporarily. The reality of waging a war that outlasted the expectations of the establishment soon resulted in rising food prices and continued carnage at the front. In February 1917 anger exploded with further food restrictions. Thousands of housewives and women factory workers surged onto the streets. Soldiers refused to fire on the rioters, marching with them to the tsarist parliament shouting, “Bread”, “Down with the tsar”, and, “Stop the war”. Hundreds of thousands struck and demonstrators clashed with troops. Workers armed themselves and, decisively, whole regiments of soldiers deserted to the side of the workers. Within 48 hours the tsar was overthrown, replaced by a provisional government.

There is general agreement about the February Revolution that it was a genuine, spontaneous revolutionary upsurge—as opposed to the “undemocratic” October insurrection. But while it is true that the February Revolution was not “called” by anyone, least of all the Bolsheviks who were slow to respond, rank and file Bolsheviks were an organic part of the revolution. The best militants in every workplace were often members or supporters of the Bolsheviks. Here was not a party floating above workers’ heads waiting to swoop down and seize power, but one integrally part of that class.

After February the key forces in Russian society were the old order, the generals keen to smash the revolution; the workers’ parties, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks; and the Social Revolutionaries who traditionally represented the peasantry, and therefore had a base in the army, but were mainly led by intellectuals. The provisional government consisted predominantly of industrialists glad to be rid of the tsar—but only to make Russian capitalism more effective—allied to big landowners. Increasingly they would rally behind the counter-revolutionary forces. The Social Revolutionary Kerensky joined the government to appease the masses.

The February Revolution inspired workers with a sense of their own strength. Within weeks workers across Russia had set up their own democratically elected soviets (workers councils). Factory committees were established which placed workers’ control on the agenda. The tsarist state apparatus was dismantled. The police were replaced by workers’ militias. Across the country peasants began to seize land for themselves, and established their own committees. National groups saw in the demise of tsarism the potential for self determination and an end to Great Russian oppression. The soviets and committees went beyond dealing with economic questions—took on a political role. The democratic organisations represented the embryo of the workers’ state. Both Pipes and Figs hail the provisional government as the embodiment of democracy, despite the fact that the soviets were infinitely more democratic in representing and involving the majority.

The coexistence of the soviets and the provisional government meant there were two powers in Russian society uneasily balanced. Although supported by the majority, the predominantly Menshevik leadership of the soviets was nervous about taking power, agreeing instead to support the government. The government knew that, while it held formal power, all real power lay with the soviets—the organisations that workers and soldiers viewed as their own.

As the year wore on, the economic situation worsened. The horrific slaughter in the trenches continued, and millions of peasants were denied land by a government anxious to appease landowners. The government refused independence to Finland, angering many whose desire

for self determination was fuelled by the revolution. Growing numbers of workers became suspicious of the “moderate” socialists who propped up the unpopular government. As support drained away from the government towards the soviets, it drained away within the soviets from the Mensheviks towards the only party that opposed the coalition government and argued for a government of working people: the Bolsheviks.

In July the anger and frustration erupted into an armed demonstration of thousands trying to force the soviets to take power. Despite the obvious feeling to overthrow the government, Lenin called for patience. Lenin and the Bolsheviks acted to restrain the movement for one key reason—that the initiative of workers was probably enough to seize power, but not yet to hold it. A half ~~razle~~ revolution risked being drowned in blood by the old order.

The retreat in July cost the Bolsheviks dearly. The “moderate” socialists in the soviet, terrified of taking power and equally terrified of losing control, called loyal troops into Petrograd, disarmed revolutionary regiments, introduced the death penalty at the front for desertion and witchhunted the Bolsheviks—hundreds were arrested and imprisoned and their presses were smashed. Kerensky plotted with General Kornilov to bring military rule to Petrograd, but panicked at the last minute. He wanted desperately to suppress the soviets and the Bolsheviks, but belatedly realised the retribution of the counter-revolution would extend to himself and other moderate socialists—so he exposed Kornilov’s plans.

Both Pipes and Figs dismiss the counter-revolution as a figment of the left’s imagination. Pipes argues that it is an “absurd assessment” to see any threat to the revolution from the right, despite his own acceptance a few pages later that Kerensky ordered the imposition of martial law in Petrograd and the encirclement of the city by Kornilov’s troops!

The Bolsheviks issued demands to Kerensky—to arm the workers, to summon loyal troops to the city—but they really spoke over his head to the workers and soldiers in the city. If the government was willing to flirt with counter-revolution, it had to be exposed. But the immediate threat was from Kornilov, and the working class sprang with all its initiative and strength to beating it. Fighting companies were formed in factories, “railroad workers tore up and barricaded the tracks in order to hold back Kornilov’s army ... All the big stations had their own soviets, their railroad workers’ and their military committees. The telegraphers kept them informed of all events, all movements, all changes. The telegraphers also held up the orders of Kornilov.” (Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*) Faced with such opposition, the coup attempt fell apart.

The attempted coup decisively altered the balance between the soviets and the government. Price wrote at the time, “The masses in the country won’t endure a coalition government which betrays the revolution behind their backs any longer.” The bourgeois parties in government pushed to continue the war at the expense of social reform and, combined with the masses’ new sense of power and confidence, the polarisation between the classes sharpened.

This is an element today’s revisionist historians neglect entirely. Refusing to see class as the central divide in Russian society, they cannot understand why the revolution did not restrict itself to developing parliamentary democracy. So, while accepting that the Kerensky government was weak and ineffectual, they insist a different coalition could have resolved Russia’s crisis. But the crisis was not purely driven by the mood of those at the bottom of

society, but also by the increasing intolerance of the capitalist class towards any aspect of workers' control and the landowners' resistance to the widespread seizure of estates by the peasantry. The choice in October was not between workers' power and parliamentary democracy, but between workers' power and the imposition of a dictatorship intent on smashing the soviets and returning the estates to the rich landowners.

By September the Bolsheviks had won the majority in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. The party grew enormously—from 24,000 in February to 240,000 in August. The vast majority who joined were workers and soldiers. This was no small conspiratorial group, but a mass party. Millions were moving towards revolutionary ideas. Betrayed by the leaders installed by the February Revolution—with all the conditions of war, food shortages, repression from landlords and bosses still intact—workers and peasants increasingly identified with the Bolshevik slogans: bread, peace and land. These were not, as Pipes argues, “ideas which the socialists planted in the mind of the population”—they related to the mood growing from the general crisis.

Workers' control over the factories increased as bosses tried to sabotage production or close factories. At the front the army was disintegrating as more and more refused to fight a war they did not believe in. Peasants seized land from the estates. In other words, in real life power was already passing to the masses on the ground. All that remained was the seizure of political power.

Lenin was clear that holding power was not the task of a tiny minority, but something the whole population must take on. Far from lusting after personal power at the expense of the majority, he argued, “To be successful, insurrection must rely not upon conspiracy and not upon a party, but upon the advanced class ... Insurrection must rely upon a revolutionary upsurge of the people.”

It is true that the October insurrection did not look like the February Revolution. It was not a spontaneous outpouring onto the streets, but a carefully organised seizure of key areas of the city by armed workers. It is not true, however, that it was carried out without the support of the majority. It was an intensely popular revolution, the realisation of the aspirations of millions of people. Hardly anyone bothered to defend the government. This is backed up by Sukhanov, a Menshevik and no fan of the Bolsheviks, in a quote absent in either Pipes or Figs' books:

To talk about military conspiracy instead of national insurrection, when the party was followed by the overwhelming majority of the people, when the party had already de facto conquered all real power and authority, was clearly an absurdity.

To argue October was the work of one small dictatorial group not only ignores the fact that the Bolsheviks were a mass party, but also that the party could not have single-handedly created the conditions for workers' power. Those conditions were built through a myriad of organisations on the ground—the national network of soviets, factory committees, trade unions, militias, Red Guards, co-ops, cultural associations—by millions of workers.

Workers' actions in 1917 were not carried out blindly, but were “a cautious and painful development of consciousness”. That consciousness was not invented by the Bolsheviks. By October the working class had tried everything else. The government had betrayed them, the moderate socialists had betrayed them, demonstrations had brought either repression or

limited gains which no longer satisfied their hopes for a better life, and the counter-revolutionary threat had made the stakes clear—go forward or be smashed.

The Bolsheviks were decisive in October—without a party constantly raising the level of the most advanced sections of the class, the revolution would not have been able to break the political and economic power of the capitalists and their defenders. But they did not substitute for the class. Workers knew that the Bolsheviks had argued against the war when it was unpopular. Now Bolshevik slogans articulated the demands of the advanced class and pulled millions more behind.

The way the revolution was constricted, embattled, and ultimately destroyed was a huge tragedy for the world working class. What happened in Russia was a direct result of the civil war, invasion and famine that decimated the working class in the years following 1917—it was not a result of the way the revolution was won.

The independent activity of the masses held centre stage in the revolution. It was this which overthrew the tsar, built workers' organisations—including the Bolshevik Party—and, coupled with the betrayals of the other parties in Russia, gave the Bolsheviks the support necessary to prosecute for power.

The Russian Revolution was the high point of workers' consciousness of themselves as a class, and of their awakening realisation that in their hands lay the material and creative capability to construct an equal and democratic state. Any other interpretation writes this tremendous revolutionary force out of history and by definition obliterates the possibility of revolutionary change today. A true reading of history consigns the right wing conspiracy theories to the dustbin. The overwhelming victors in 1917 were not a small clique, but the working class and the oppressed of Russia.

The Russian Revolution

By Tony Cliff, from *Marxism at the Millennium*, Chapter 10

On 23 February 1917 celebrations of International Women's Day began. This was the start of the revolution. Next day 200,000 workers went on strike in Petrograd. The day after, on the 25th, a general strike gripped the city and a number of strikers were killed by the army. Two days later there was a mutiny of the Guards regiments, soldiers refused to shoot at demonstrators, and in some cases, the officer ordering the shootings was killed by one of the soldiers. The Tsar abdicated. What is interesting is that just a day before the abdication of the Tsar a Soviet Of Workers' Deputies was formed. The memory of the 1905 Soviet accelerated the event. All workplaces sent delegates to the Soviet.

The revolution was completely spontaneous and unplanned. As Trotsky correctly stated:

No one, positively no one—we can assert this categorically upon the basis of all the data—then thought that 23 February was to mark the beginning of a decisive drive against absolutism.

Sukhanov, a brilliant witness of the revolution, observes, "Not one party was preparing for the great upheaval." Similarly a former director of the Okhrana, the Tsarist secret police, stated that the revolution was "a purely spontaneous phenomenon, and not at all the fruit of party agitation." As millions of people came into political life for the first time, the Bolshevik Party appeared as very marginal, having, after the revolution, some 23,000 members. It was not until 25 February that the Bolsheviks came out with their first leaflet calling for a general strike—after 200,000 workers had already downed tools! In the elections to the soviet the Bolsheviks made up a tiny minority. Out of 1,500 to 1,600 delegates only 40, or 2.5 percent were Bolsheviks.

Dual power

Side by side with the Provisional Government, led by Prince L'vov, was the government of the soviets. There was, therefore, dual power.

Such a situation could not continue for any length of time. One of the two governments would have to give way.

To start with, the Soviet supported the L'vov government. At the session of the Soviet of 2 March, a resolution was put forward to transfer power to the Provisional Government, i.e. to the bourgeoisie. Only 15 deputies voted against it. This means that not even the 40 Bolsheviks opposed this. The mass pressure from some 1,600 deputies bent the Bolsheviks over. The parties dominating the Soviet, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, took a muddled position. They supported the soviets but also supported the bourgeois Provisional Government. They wanted peace but supported the war, They were sympathetic to the peasants' demand for land but supported the government which was the spokesman of the landowners.

But a revolution does not allow a middle way compromise. Life posed every question in very extreme form.

The Bolshevik leadership in Russia were themselves extremely muddled. On 3 March the

Petrograd Committee of the Bolshevik Party passed a resolution that it would "not oppose the power of the Provisional Government in so far as its activities correspond to the interests of the proletariat and of the broad democratic masses of the people." The formula "in so far as" (*postolka, posilku*) appeared in the resolution of the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet on relations with the Provisional Government, and became a way of referring to this particular policy of supporting the government.

Lenin in Switzerland was livid when he got a copy of Pravda that declared that the Bolsheviks would decisively support the Provisional Government "insofar as it struggles against reaction or counter-revolution"—forgetting that the only important agent of counter-revolution at the time was this same Provisional Government.

Lenin rearms the party

On 3 April 1917 Lenin arrived in Petrograd. When Lenin arrived at the Finland station the Bolshevik Party supported the victorious February Revolution. Lenin was contemptuous and raised the slogans, "Bread, peace and land", and, "All power to the soviets."

The revolutionaries of course tried to influence the masses, but it is not a one-way street. The views of the massive majority affect the revolutionaries. A few days later Lenin met the Petrograd committee of the Bolshevik Party. He argued the case for his April Theses. Out of 16 members present, two voted to support Lenin, 13 voted against, and one abstained.

In spite of this inauspicious beginning, Lenin was able to win a large proportion of the party to his stand in an astonishingly short time. This was the result both of Lenin's consistency and the daily experience of millions. The war went on, thousands continued to die, the land lords still harshly exploited the peasants, the capitalists lived a life of luxury while the workers suffered from penury. It took something like a month for Lenin to win the party over.

To win the soviets to his viewpoint took a little longer. At the beginning of September the Bolsheviks won a majority in the soviet of Petrograd and Trotsky became its president. At the same time the Bolsheviks won the soviet in Moscow, and the Bolshevik Kamenev became its president.

From this it was a short haul to the victory of the October Revolution.

While the February Revolution was spontaneous, the October Revolution was planned.

On 10 October the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party declared for an armed insurrection. Three days later the soldiers' section of the Petrograd Soviet voted to transfer all military authority from headquarters to a Military Revolutionary Committee headed by Trotsky. On 16 October an enlarged plenum of the Central Committee, the Executive Commission of the Petrograd Committee, the Military Organisation, members of the Petrograd Soviet, trade unions, factory committees, the Petrograd Area Committee and the railwaymen reaffirmed the decision on the insurrection. On 20 October the Military Revolutionary Committee began actual preparations for the insurrection. On 25 October the insurrection took place. Trotsky organised this action brilliantly, as he did later when he led the Red Army to victory in the civil war.

Because the October Revolution was so well planned and executed hardly any blood was spilt. Far more people lost their lives in the February Revolution.

Following the revolution, during the civil war, many hundreds of thousands were killed. But this was not because of the action of the Soviet government, but because of the invasion of some 16 foreign Lenin rearms the party armies. To blame the Bolsheviks for this would be like blaming any person defending himself from a murderer for using violence.

Victorious revolution

Throughout the 20th century there were a number of proletarian revolutions. Alas, only one of them—the 1917 Russian Revolution—ended in victory. Again and again we witness half-carried revolutions, which confirm the prophetic words of St Just at the time of the French Revolution: “Those who make half a revolution dig their own grave.”

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was an exception to the series of half-made revolutions. The Bolshevik Party played a crucial role in the completion of the Russian Revolution.

The difference between success and failure, between Russia in October 1917 and the other workers’ revolutions, was that in the former case there was a mass revolutionary party providing effective leadership. While socialists cannot determine the moment when the revolutionary crisis breaks, they do determine the eventual outcome by the degree to which they build a strong revolutionary party.

“The working class, not the party, makes the revolution, but the party guides the working class,” Trotsky aptly wrote. “Without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.”

The land of the landowners was distributed to the peasants, the factories were taken into state ownership and were run under workers’ control, the oppressed nationalities got the right of self determination, and Russia that was a prison of nations became a federation of free and equal peoples.

For centuries anti-Semitism was rampant in Tsarist Russia. In 1881 500 pogroms were carried out against Jews. Jews were not allowed to live in the two capitals, Moscow and St Petrograd, unless they got special permission. Now the president of the soviet of Petrograd was a Jew, Trotsky, the president of the soviet of Moscow was a Jew, Kamenev, and the president of the Soviet Republic was a Jew, Sverdlov. When Trotsky moved to be the head of the Red Army he was replaced as president of the Petrograd Soviet by another Jew, Zinoviev.

The revolution was a festival of the oppressed. During 1917, during the month of the revolution Anatoly Lunacharsky, a brilliant speaker, held meetings of 30,000 to 40,000 people, and he would speak for two to three hours on subjects like William Shakespeare, Greek drama, etc. The population of London is four times greater than Petrograd at that time, and British workers are more literate than the Russians were. But in no way could one see a similar meeting held in London.

The Soviet government enacted the most progressive legislation in the world aiming at the emancipation of women: the right of divorce at the instigation of only one partner; free abortion on demand (the first in the world); communal feeding to free women from the kitchen; the communal upbringing of children. Also all laws against gays were got rid of.

Didn't the Russian Revolution lead to Stalin and the gulag?

This argument is heard so many times by opponents of the revolution. And it sounds like common sense. Alas, it is the same common sense that could say: the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was the product of Newton's law of gravity. There is an element of truth: if not for the law of gravity the bomb would not fall down from the plane.

The key to understanding the rise of Stalin is in the international nature of the Russian Revolution.

The Russian Revolution was part of world revolution, and cannot be explained other than in terms of international factors. The Russian industrial working class was tiny: the number of workers in the factories, railways and mines was only three million out of a population of 160 million. The industrial output of Russia in 1917 was not greater than that of tiny Belgium. But the working class was much more concentrated in big units. Thus, for instance, there were 40,000 workers in the Putilov engineering factory; it was the largest factory in the world at the time. This was not the product of the gradual organic development of the Russian economy: it was overwhelmingly the result of foreign capital invested in Russia.

The aspirations of Russian workers were also shaped by international conditions. In Britain it took more than two centuries from the beginning of factory production to workers being imbued with the demand for the eight hour day. In Russia it became the central demand of the 1905 revolution.

Marxism was also not a native product of Russia. There was no Russian Adam Smith followed by a Russian David Ricardo followed by a Russian Karl Marx, Marxism came fully fledged into the intellectual-political life of Russia. Volume I of Capital was published first in 1867. It appeared in the Russian edition six years later. It was the first language into which Capital was translated. Finally, the last impetus for the Russian Revolution also came from abroad—the hammering by the German troops of the Russian army.

Lenin and Trotsky again and again warned that the Soviet regime would be doomed if the Revolution did not spread, above all if the German Revolution did not come to its aid. And so it came to be.

Stalin was not the heir of the Russian Revolution, but its gravedigger. The fact that he murdered every member of the Bolshevik Central Committee who survived the revolution and the civil war demonstrates this. The father of Stalinism was not Lenin but Noske, the right wing Social Democratic leader who was directly involved in the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and in the murder of the German Revolution.

Tragically, the German Revolution was far less well organised or developed than the Russian. I remember meeting Heinrich Brandler, leader of the German Communist Party after the death of Rosa Luxemburg. I asked him what the state of Rosa Luxemburg's organisation was in 1918. He said it had some 4,000 members, the majority of them not Marxists but pacifists (his words). Compare this to the Bolsheviks, who existed as a party since 1903, with a membership in 1917 of 23,600—and this in a country where the working class was much smaller than in Germany. In a stream water remains clean. In stagnating water, scum comes to the top.

The isolation of the Russian Revolution led to the bureaucratic scum coming to the top. And

when Stalin entered into competition with Western imperialism, he of necessity imitated it. If Nazi Germany had a massive industrial-military machine, Stalin wanted the same. To achieve this quickly, the only way was by harshly exploiting the Russian workers and peasants—hence the gulag. Stalinist Russia became more and more symmetrical to Nazi Germany. Its regime became state capitalist.